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RWU Criminal Justice Alumnus Developing a National Framework for School Policing

As part of a team, Joseph McKenna is creating an evidence-based framework for best implementing school-based law enforcement programs



Joseph McKenna '11 is an associate director of research and evaluation for the Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University who earned his B.A. at RWU in Criminal Justice.

July 19, 2017 | Juan Siliezar

BRISTOL, R.I. – One of the fastest growing areas of law enforcement today is happening on the campus of the nation's K-12 schools, reflecting the steadily increased presence and expanding roles of school-based law enforcement programs in recent decades. Although police have been present in schools since the 1950s, researchers are just now beginning to uncover issues ranging from undefined, changing roles to the lack of adequate training for school-based officers. Among those researchers is Roger Williams University alumnus Joseph McKenna '11, who is helping to frame a first-of-its-kind national model on how to best implement school-based law enforcement programs to aid school communities.

As associate director of research and evaluation for the Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University – where he earned his master's and doctorate in criminal justice – McKenna is part of a team conducting research examining the use of law enforcement in K-12 schools in order to put together a nationwide framework for educators and school-based officers to use.

The study and framework is being funded by a four-year \$4.3 million grant by the National Institute of Justice. Taking other research as well as their own, the researchers at the center created the framework as a flexible template schools around the nation can adopt based on their own community. To determine if the framework is effective, McKenna and the researchers at Texas School Safety Center are conducting a randomized controlled trial with over two dozen Texas K-12 schools. Half of the participating schools are being guided by the research-based framework for implementing their school-based law enforcement program that McKenna and the team of researchers helped developed.

"It's really become a specialized type of policing" which requires specialized training, said McKenna, who was a criminal justice and psychology double major at RWU.

In his research, he's seen the predominant role of school-based officers change since they were first introduced in the 1950s. He has seen focus shift from safety and security during the school day to include educating students on a variety of topics related to crime and law and then to officers serving as mentors and role models. Today, officers play hybrid roles that very much depends on the school campus they are on, McKenna said. They act as mentors, counselors, surrogate parents - giving advice, emotional support and even material items like clothes - along with serving as educators and, when necessary, law enforcers.

What McKenna and many researchers are trying to do is define a shared set of roles and training that communities nationwide can adopt for their school-based law enforcement program to encompass and define the various roles officers play now. The framework involves setting custom goals that are agreed upon by all stakeholders, training for officers and school staff, and using data-driven decision making to make program adjustments and solve problems.

Currently, not much guidance exists for integrating law enforcement officers into the school setting nor is there training that is widely available, McKenna said. This universal framework, if picked up nationwide, would have the potential to have considerable impact in studying policing in schools and its effectiveness, which currently has not been determined.

"We owe it as researchers to use our skill set and use our training to better improve policing so that we can have better outcomes for students as well as better outcomes for officers," McKenna said.

McKenna believes more focused training and a defined role is something many officers would welcome. A lot of officers say they learn on the job but that there's no place for them to get formal training or a clear set of objectives on what their main focus is, he said.

"What we hope is that this framework maximizes the positive outcomes and minimizes the negative ones," McKenna said. "If we can get everyone using the framework, we can start to look at what is effective."

Last spring, McKenna returned to RWU and presented his research to students and faculty. He credited his hands-on, personalized experience in the Roger Williams' Criminal Justice program with laying the foundation for his success.

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